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Thou Art That

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Paula Sarut

May 2009

Mira Gerard, Chair

Anita DeAngelis

Catherine Murray

Keywords: Divinity, Motherhood, Metaphor, Bonding, Metanoia, Woman

ABSTRACT

THOU ART THAT

by

Paula Sarut

The artist discusses her Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Thou Art That*, held in Slocumb Galleries, East Tennessee State University, from November 3-7, 2008. The exhibit consists of self-portraits in oil on stretched canvas painted between May and October 2008.

Ideas explored include the creative power of limitation, metaphor, divinity, relationship, human development, life experience, and the bond between mother and child. Influences discussed include the written works and ideas of Joseph Campbell and Joseph Chilton Pearce, as well as the ideas of artist Judy Chicago, art critic Suzi Gablik, and the artwork of Gerhard Richter.

Included is a complete catalogue of the paintings from *Thou Art That*.

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Thank you:

To my parents who gave me my first experiences with unconditional love.

To Joshua, for support and encouragement beyond all measure. I humbly and gratefully celebrate your participation in the co-creation of our relationship, our children, and this thesis.

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To my committee: Mira Gerard, Anita DeAngelis, and Catherine Murray. Your insights and support have fueled my creativity in very important ways.

To fellow artists: Thank you for not letting metaphor get snuffed out in a world stuck in literalism.

DEDICATION

To my daughter, Stella.
May you grow to see the divine within as early as possible.

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
DEDICATION	4
LIST OF FIGURES	6
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	7
On Being a Woman, Mother, and Artist	7
2. BIRTH, BONDING, PAINTING	13
Creating the Bond	14
3. PROCESS AND MATERIALS	18
Other Formal Qualities	20
4. CURRENT WORK	22
Choosing the Images	22
Literal and Metaphorical Interpretation of the Images	23
5. CONCLUSION	30
WORKS CITED	34
CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION	35
APPENDIX: ARTIST STATEMENT	45
VITA.....	46

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
1. Concrete Operations	25
2. Assertion	27
3. Fading	28
4. Self-Soother	29
5. Establishing the Bond	29
6. Effortless	30

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Oppression is not the mother of virtue; oppression can warp,
undermine, turn us into haters of ourselves. But it can also turn us into
realists, who neither hate ourselves nor assume we are merely innocent
and unaccountable victims. -Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

On Being a Woman, Mother, and Artist

The content of the work in my Master of Fine Arts exhibit is highly personal but draws on the rich, complex history of being a woman, a mother, and an artist. Unfortunately, this history is not offered up freely in undergraduate art history classes but usually must be sought out, or perhaps is segregated to a Women's Studies curriculum or the occasional Special Topics art history class. Thanks to the Internet, information on women artists is easier to find than it once was, but there is no doubt that the term "female artist" sounds less odd to the ear than "male artist". Our culture has a long way to go to not only demonstrate a true belief in equality between the genders but to actively facilitate and support this in action. Furthermore, while many women have become successful, well-established artists, there is a unique struggle for an artist who is also a woman and a mother. For the woman who chooses to make her experience as a mother and a woman the subject of her art, she can anticipate being ignored, dismissed, or criticized by not only men but other women as well.

Judy Chicago, an American artist who emerged in the mid-1970s, wrote a book

about her life and experiences called *Through the Flower: My Struggle As a Woman Artist*. When I bought it at a used book store six or seven years ago, I read it intently and quickly, finding her story, and her own telling of it, to be extremely affirming of things I had not identified or reconciled within myself both as a female and as an artist. Yet I shelved the book after reading it and, until very recently, had not picked it up since. When I flip through the book now and find certain passages underlined, I know that the book resonated with me very deeply at the time, but I wasn't ready to tackle the issues as they existed deep within my own psyche.

Many parts of the book were especially powerful because Chicago writes about her own experience as a female artist, but she also sought to connect with other women, some of whom were also artists. They simply wanted to be more whole as artists and as women. Building a sense of connection and community fostered empowerment and emotional growth for many of the women who chose to participate and minimized the sense of isolation that so many women feel in their studios. She writes,

...because the female role has demanded that women stay immersed in the 'private,' many women have never made the link-up in their work between their personal fantasy and the larger human world. Thus their work remains isolated within the sphere of the female even while they act, by making art, outside of that sphere. (190)

While it can be intimidating to venture out of the safe space of the individual studio, Chicago points out that the benefits usually outweigh the risks. In her 1995 book, *Conversations before the end of time*, Suzi Gablik published transcribed conversations with numerous people (including artists) and emphasizes the importance of art that

fosters a sense of community, connection, and awareness of life outside the studio. This clearly comes back to the idea that when we are able to live with a sense of something beyond ourselves, we become more whole. Making art can be an investigation of expanding awareness, including the values and principles that have been ignored, dismissed, or blatantly condemned by the patriarchal art establishment that gained momentum with the rise of modernism. Thomas Moore, a former Catholic monk and author of books like *Care of the Soul* and *Soul Mates*, says in one of the conversations with Gablik,

We insist on individualism and self-expression because we haven't touched deep enough roots of what it is to be an individual. And I suspect that as we get closer to it, we'll discover that it is not as remote from community as we now believe.

Gablik replies,

Another paradox about all this is how the loss of the communal dimension in our particular culture has actually truncated our sense of individuality, because we have such a distorted experience of the world that comes to us exclusively through the limited ego-self. We know only about separateness; we know so little about interdependence. But returning soul to the world and leaving behind the modern paradigm seem to be linked, wouldn't you say, with a dismantling of patriarchal consciousness and

lifting the repression of the feminine? (398)

While their particular conversation isn't just about art, it certainly touches on how the pervading cultural paradigm affects the individual who is an artist and making art within that cultural paradigm.

In *Through the Flower*, Chicago also researches and discusses the history of women artists as it relates to her own experiences. Reading art history from this point of view is profoundly different from reading a "regular" art history textbook. In a section about Mary Cassatt, she writes,

Cassatt immersed herself in the representation of women, children, and their interrelations. I saw the same sensibility that pervaded women's self-portraits, a perception of women not as sexual creatures, but as real people...I found myself able to identify with the women in her paintings, whereas I find it difficult to see most paintings of women by men as having anything to do with reality as I experience it. (155-56)

Women's self-portraits have reflected shifts in the styles and movements of Western art history, but they always present the woman as she sees herself. Reflecting upon this, I am reminded why self-portraiture has been a recurring theme for me in my own work; it's a way of remaining in touch with how I perceive myself from the inside-out rather than seeing myself through the eyes of the dominant paradigm in which my awareness remains outside myself looking in. Many female artists have used this vehicle of self-portraiture to depict how they perceive themselves but also to invite the audience to re-

examine how it sees them as women. Feminist art has most often involved the latter approach, such as in photography by Cindy Sherman or paintings by Alice Neel, but two female painters from the 1970s took unique approaches to their work. Sylvia Sleigh painted many portraits of male nudes but not as mere substitutes for the typical female nude figure. She emphasized the unique and individual qualities of each man, representing whole people not mere objects of a voyeuristic gaze. Joan Semmel's nude self-portraits were done from her own point of view, bringing the viewer into her space, an intimate way of shifting perspective from that of being separate to that of being empathic to another's experience. We all look at our own bodies, and this is a very different experience from looking at someone else's, especially when the other person is simply a representation and not aware of the fact that they are being observed. Semmel's work is especially poignant for me because she invites the viewer into her personal space, rather than imposing her emotions or feelings upon the viewer, like some of the women who were making art at the same time.

The history of female artists is rich, very complex, and has been quietly left out of the art history canon for the majority of the modern and postmodern eras. There was certainly a surge of activity and recognition for feminist art in the 1970s that paralleled the wave of feminism permeating the culture at the time. Pieces like Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* powerfully addressed issues that, unfortunately, remain today. She documented the growth and development of her son across a six-year period (1973-79) but with a tone of scientific objectivity. From the website of the Generali Foundation:

The artist has added diary-like notes and quasi-scientific data to these

private objects so that subjective references are juxtaposed with the more distanced or theoretical approaches represented by the diagrams...In her critical engagement with psychoanalysis and feminism as well as her provocative stance vis-a-vis conceptualism, Mary Kelly has succeeded in creating a multi-faceted artwork documenting one of modernism's central and most symptomatic blind spots: the woman as artist and mother. Her seven-year process of reflection and visualization has meanwhile assumed a unique place within art history.

While it was demonstrated during the 1970s that women were capable and willing to be assertive and proactive about their own lives and choices, the foundation upon which our culture has been sitting for hundreds of years is still patriarchal. Art made in this cultural context can only ever be considered against that backdrop, if it is acknowledged at all. This will be true unless women are respected and treated equally, rather than contemptuously, and motherhood is once again considered to be a revered and sacred role. Being a woman, mother, and artist is the cultural and personal context in which this body of work was created and should be considered from this perspective.

CHAPTER 2

BIRTH, BONDING, AND PAINTING

...the experience of the mystery comes not from expecting it, but from yielding all your programs, because your programs are based on fear and desire. Drop them and the radiance comes.

-Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That*

The title of this thesis, *Thou Art That*, is also the title of a book by Joseph Campbell, the well-known scholar who wrote about the power of myth. The phrase, originally "Tat tvam asi" in Sanskrit is found in the ancient Hindu religious texts, the Upanishads. In short, it involves seeing the divine in everything. Campbell's book explores the idea that people who believe in some form of a divine presence fall into two groups: those who believe the divine exists separately from them and are in a dichotomy of either/or; and those who believe the divine exists everywhere, and are therefore a part of the divine themselves and subsequently in a dynamic that might be better described as both/and. Campbell writes in the book, "In other words, ours is a religion of *relationship: a*, the creature, *related* to *X*, the Creator (aRX). In the Orient, on the other hand, the appropriate formula would be something more like the simple equation, $a=X$ " (27).

In my life up to this point, I'd come to believe certain things intellectually but had lacked the life experience to integrate them into my life. When I first read *Thou Art That*, the concepts resonated deeply, especially the idea that the divine is present within everything that exists. However, through intense and challenging conversations with

people I loved and respected, and plenty of self-exploration, I came to believe that until I saw that divinity present within myself, I would not be able to behave as though it existed in everything and everyone else. I also knew that this was a deeply archetypal journey that began with my own birth and my relationship with my mother. When my daughter Stella was born, I saw the divine in her immediately. When I looked in the mirror, I saw an emotionally fragile person with deep insecurities and fears.

When I first learned I was pregnant, I realized that I had strong feelings about how I wanted to give birth. I noticed that I let go of a usually-pervasive need to get approval from others. I did not need reassurance that what I wanted was okay; I simply needed the agreement and cooperation of those who would be present with me for the birth. I noticed that I hadn't experienced such clarity where my own happiness and well-being were concerned; something shifted once I knew I'd be procreating. I began to think about my own childhood, my relationship with my mom, and how that shaped my perceptions of self, motherhood, gender, and social role. I also began to wonder just how one begins to live aligned with one's beliefs. If I truly believed that everything, including me, was connected to and a part of the divine, how would I live that in action everyday? Furthermore, how would that process emerge in my art?

Creating the Bond

Time demands we move forward, even when we think we're not ready. My sense of urgency to heal myself was integrated into a relentless daily routine. Reading this in a book written by Joseph Chilton Pearce called *Magical Child* replaced some of my fear with hope:

Only through faith can we open to the life process within us and make a proper response to nurturing our children, and only through that response can we again open to and reclaim our faith and personal power. What we will find is that only by our initial actions, in which we act as though we *had* personal power and knew what to do, can we, in fact, activate that power and knowing. Understanding follows knowing, and knowing results from actions, and proper actions can follow only some deep, intuitive hunch that bypasses ordinary thinking. (27)

This book, which I bought long before I was pregnant, outlines Pearce's discoveries about human development and the potential that we as evolving beings had not yet begun to nurture in ourselves or our children. I hadn't read far into the book, but once I got pregnant, I felt a sense of urgency about read it again. Pearce emphasized the critical importance of the period of bonding between mothers and their newborns, stating that all subsequent levels of human development hinge on the bond established. He writes at length about the difference between bonding and attachment: bonded mothers and infants "participate in shared functions that need no articulation, that simply call for spontaneous response, a mutual meeting of needs and a mutual fulfillment on emotional-intuitive levels" (59). Attached infants, however, spent so much energy trying to get their basic needs met, which all involve bonding with the mother (close and constant physical contact, breastfeeding, comforting, learning that there is a safe place to which they can always return and on whom they can always rely), their intellectual and emotional

development was stunted. In other words, babies who spend more time crying spend less time learning and growing. Attached infants then create substitutes for their mother, resorting to self-soothing with pacifiers, thumbs, blankets, and eventually growing older but becoming adults who remain emotionally underdeveloped and in a constant search for that fundamentally safe space to which they can always return (Pearce 58-73). The ideas that Pearce studied and wrote about provided me with valuable insight regarding not only the growth and development of my daughter but my own as well. My biggest challenge was to channel some of that energy into making art again.

As it turned out, making a painting after Stella was born was much more difficult for me than being a new mother. I'd fumbled and struggled with water-based media while I was pregnant, so it had been nearly a year since I'd painted anything in oil. I'd dedicated myself to trying other, less toxic media while I was pregnant, but it felt forced. Though I did make some watercolors the spring before Stella was born, I'd had very little inclination to make art during my pregnancy and for several months thereafter.

When I did begin to paint again, I naturally returned to figurative work. I'd mostly been painting the human figure since I began painting in 1997, and I felt more compelled than ever to concentrate on self-portraits. My identity was scrambled in ways that both terrified me and filled me with a strange kind of new hope. At the time, I felt incredibly insecure about my postpartum body. I'd experienced a hiatus from cultural expectations of what my body should look like while I was pregnant, but now that Stella was on the outside the overwhelming pressure I'd learned to live with for twenty-nine years returned with a vengeance. After several self-portraits with less specific content, I painted one towards the end of the fall 2007 semester that depicted my upper torso, clad

in a completely impractical, lacy bra, hooked up to a breast pump. It spoke of the conflict I felt, which was magnified by the fact that Stella was a girl. I wanted to resolve these issues in myself as soon as possible so I could be a healthy, happy example of a woman at peace with her gender role and her sexuality. I knew that finding this equilibrium within myself couldn't happen too soon.

It seems now to have been no small coincidence that I was undergoing a "crisis of faith" with making art after Stella was born. I wasn't interested in putting energy into something that seemed so self-indulgent and (now ironic) something that seemed to have nothing to do with her. On one hand, I knew I needed something that I could pour my energy into, a passion of my own to follow, so that Stella would have a mom who was a whole person who had many roles. While my deepest urges were to pour all my energy into Stella and my relationship with her father, I also knew that I needed to keep making art even as I continued to resist it.

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS AND MATERIALS

Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end; then stop.
-Lewis Carroll

While the content of my work is what I value most, it would disintegrate without a stable and solid understanding of basic formal issues. Likewise, a ritualized studio process lends itself to more clearly communicating the content of the work. There is an interesting paragraph in the book, *Art & Fear: Observations On the Perils (& Rewards) of Artmaking*, that discusses how an artist chooses the materials with which s/he works:

The dilemma every artist confronts, again and again, is when to stick with familiar tools and materials, and when to reach out and embrace those that offer new possibilities. And on average, the younger artist tends to experiment with a large and varied range of tools and materials, while the veteran artist tends to employ a small and specific set. In time, as an artist's gestures become more assured, the chosen tools become almost an extension of the artist's own spirit. In time, exploration gives way to expression. (Bayles and Orland 59)

After reading this, it became clear that my materials and tools are a crucial part of my art-making process. In the eleven years that I've been painting, I've been painting with oil on stretched canvas and using photographic references nearly the entire time. It's rarely been my inclination to experiment with new tools and materials; the idea of it seems good and

important, but the reality of it feels distracting. The authors of *Art & Fear* write that exploration is often the choice of a younger artist, while expression is the tendency of a more experienced artist, but I gravitated toward very specific choices in materials early in my painting career. Once I found a process that felt right to me, I simply didn't want to spend time starting over with anything else. As the authors of *Art & Fear* write on the next page:

Working within the self-imposed discipline of a particular form eases the prospect of having to reinvent yourself with each new piece. The discovery of useful forms is precious. Once found, they should never be abandoned for trivial reasons. (60-61)

Besides believing that I had potentially already found a useful form in painting with oil on canvas, I also began to trust in the "creative power of limitation." I find that when I use a medium or other tools with which I am already familiar, it creates a space that allows me to explore other aspects of the creative process more deeply. This principle is something that I return to over and over again, having found the words for the concept as a freshman in college. An English professor, Dr. Conrad Hilberry who teaches at my alma mater, wrote an essay titled "Burma-Shave and the Art of Losing," and it is a testimony to the rich possibilities inherent in structured form. My art history professor read it to the freshman seminar writing class she taught my very first term in college, and it has been a fundamental part of how I make art, as well as how I perceive the creative process, ever since.

The essay uses the example of the Burma-Shave signs that used to be displayed

along the highways back in the 1920s. Burma-Shave was the first shaving cream that could be applied straight from the jar rather than with a brush. In order to effectively market the product, one of the inventor's sons decided to put up a series of signs spaced evenly along the highway, saying things like *Shave the modern way / Fine for the skin / Druggists have it / Burma-Shave*. By the third year a more structured form had emerged: they rhymed, there were always six signs (with the last one reading *Burma-Shave*), they had contests where the public could send in ideas, and they kept this form for almost forty years when the interstate system put them out of business in the 1960s. Some of the best ones include: *Shaving brushes / You'll soon see 'em / Way down east / In some museum / Burma-Shave*, and *His face was smooth / And cool as ice / And oh Louise! / He smelled / So nice / Burma-Shave*. The series of signs kept a particular rhyme structure, and that confinement allowed for creative results that would have been very unlikely, and certainly less catchy, without it.

Dr. Hilberry writes in his essay that we often resist the structure or confinement we feel in our lives: our relationships, our jobs, our assignments in school, and so on. In our culture, we value freedom and individuality so much, we tend to forget how valuable structure and certain types of confinement can be. While I use a visual medium rather than a verbal one, I choose to use oil on canvas mostly so I don't have to reinvent my process with each new painting; subsequently, the creative power of limitation is present in each one.

Other Formal Qualities

When I respond to a piece of artwork that deeply moves me, it is almost always

because of content. It is extremely rare that I feel emotionally pulled into a piece simply because of its formal qualities. Composition, palette, surface, or line quality may enhance the impact of the content, but a piece that is simply about formal qualities appeals to my intellectual curiosity. I generally prefer work that involves a harmony of both content and formal qualities.

Lesende, a representational painting by Gerhard Richter, was one of the first paintings I saw in person to leave me awestruck by this dynamic, and it was only partly subconscious to make his influence apparent in my own work. While at first glance, he simply recreates a photograph using oil paint, a mere exercise in manipulating substances on a surface, the hand of the artist is still certainly there with all the subtleties it communicates. In the translation from photograph to painted image the more human qualities in the creative process emerge. Whereas photography captures an image in a split second, a painting requires time and perhaps, arguably, a clearer intention. Richter has insisted that he "just wanted to paint, to make pictures" (Storr), but I believe there's more to it than that. I believe that Richter had to learn the rules of visual art before he could ever "just paint".

Initially, making pieces about line quality and space had to be the primary focus of my art-making efforts because I still hadn't learned to use them as a means to another end. Once I had a better understanding of them, they became tools that I could use to strengthen the impact of the content. The choices I make regarding many formal issues are now much more intuitive because I have a better understanding of the function they serve. That being the case, they can then enrich the content of the pieces, creating a symbiosis within the work.

CHAPTER 4

CURRENT WORK

These images must point past all meanings given, beyond all definitions and relationships, to that really ineffable mystery that is just the existence, the being of ourselves and our world. If we give that mystery an exact meaning, we diminish the experience of its real depth. -Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That*

Choosing the Images

The paintings in this exhibit developed from a very organic and unstructured process. The process by which I choose images to use for paintings has been the same since I started painting, really. The only difference is that back then, I looked through pre-existing photographs for ones that looked like images I thought I could paint. Now, I take photos and often compose them as if they were going to be paintings, making the images more intentional. When I began painting in preparation for this exhibit, my only criterion was that they be self-portraits and that they be indicative of motherhood somehow. I wanted to make paintings that would reflect a specific set of experiences but be reflective of the universal experiences that potentially unite all mothers together. Because the experiences of mothers are often shared by fathers, other children, friends, and family members, those experiences are also indicative of a more general human experience.

Literal and Metaphorical Interpretation of the Images

At the beginning of the summer, my definition of "self-portrait" was straightforward and predictable: portraits of myself. *Concrete Operations* (Figure 1) initiates a dialogue with the viewer, but the painted image is of my own face and body.



(Figure 1) *Concrete Operations*

As the summer progressed, I began to feel an urge to paint images of Stella, even though I resisted the idea of making a painting of a baby, both because they are often reflective of society's tendency to oversimplify the emotions and experiences of infants and toddlers and also because I was committed to painting self-portraits. I began to think about having read *Thou Art That*, and expanding my definition of "self." Painting Stella seemed to be the perfect way to explore these ideas, visually and otherwise.

The subtitle of the book, *Thou Art That is, Transforming Religious Metaphor*. The book uses examples from various religions to demonstrate how literal interpretations of content have caused so many people to, for lack of a better term, miss the point.

Campbell emphasizes, "When the language of metaphor is misunderstood and its surface structure becomes brittle, it evokes merely the current time-and-place-bound order of things and its spiritual signal, if transmitted at all, becomes ever fainter" (7). In other words, the link to something larger than ourselves is lost. The holographic construct crumbles because there's nothing to link the individual to a greater whole. My drive to make art is now largely driven by this principle; I need to feel like my own life is connected to something larger and more meaningful, but I also believe that art is one of the few ways that people still respond to metaphor. Campbell articulates it wonderfully:

Artists share the calling, according to their disciplines and crafts, to cast the new images of mythology. That is, they provide the contemporary metaphors that allow us to realize the transcendent, infinite, and abundant nature of being as it is. Their metaphors are the essential elements of the symbols that make manifest the radiance of the world just as it is, rather than arguing that it should be one way or the other. They reveal it as it is.

(6)

Gerhard Richter has famously said, "I feel close to this idea of seeing the pain and loss in the world. I can't paint as well as Vermeer - we have lost this beautiful culture, all the utopias are shattered, everything goes down the drain, the wonderful time of painting is over" (Leight). I disagree with the latter part of this statement because there is a timelessness to the power of communication through metaphor. Any art form that communicates the nature of being has not gone down the drain, not at all. The only way

that I believe the time of painting could be over is if art is simply a commodity, a moneymaking tool. At that point, its creation becomes contaminated and loses its connection to symbol, metaphor, and the timelessness of the human story.

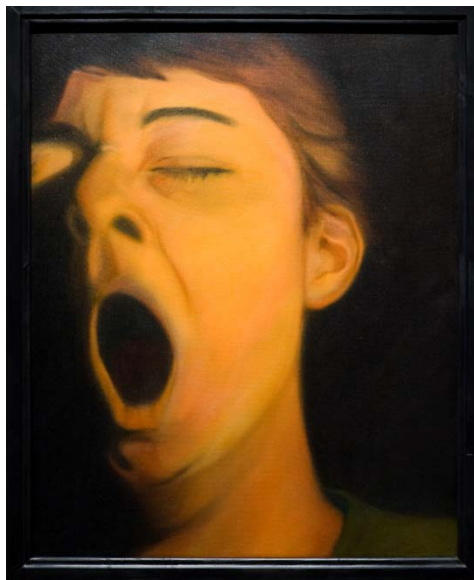


(Figure 2) *Assertion*

A short while after painting some of the pieces in my thesis, metaphorical meaning began to emerge beyond the broader concepts that drove the work itself. In several pieces, including *Assertion* (Figure 2), the figure's mouth is open. This became apparent once the paintings were set up around the studio for viewing. In *Concrete Operations* (Figure 1), the figure is holding a spoon up from which the implied baby (viewer) can eat. As many have observed, it's difficult to direct a spoon toward an infant's open mouth without opening one's own at the same time. The literal interpretation of this painting's imagery refers to the joyful experience of feeding a baby, teaching her a basic skill, to eat from a utensil. However, as I realized after I noticed the recurring "open mouth" theme in the other pieces, there was also a metaphorical interpretation, the mouth as a mirror of the birth canal. Literally giving birth is surely a creative act, as is choosing to speak. Giving birth is often a metaphor for other creative acts, and these paintings began to represent the process of asserting oneself in the world. Babies' cries upon emerging from

the womb are often interpreted as an assertion: "I am here!" I suppose that on an evolutionary level, giving birth to Stella presented me with an opportunity to re-assert that for myself, but creating the paintings represented that assertion yet again as it related to both of us.

Another element I noticed in the work that was perhaps harder to interpret, but no less significant, was the obscured backgrounds in six of the paintings in the exhibit. In *Fading* (Figure 3) and *Self-Soother* (Figure 4), I simply felt like the backgrounds in the source photographs were likely to weaken the painting more than strengthen it, so I faded it out.



(Figure 3) *Fading*



(Figure 4) *Self-Soother*

In *Establishing the Bond* (Figure 5), the figure took up so much of the photograph, there was virtually nothing to include. However, the metaphorical meaning became apparent shortly thereafter. This choice was also partly inspired by works I'd seen by artists like



(Figure 5) *Establishing the Bond*

Sophie Jodoin, a native of Montreal who works with acrylic, charcoal, and pastel on paper. Jodoin often composes figurative pieces in a chiaroscuro light scheme where the figure hauntingly emerges from an obscured background. When Stella was born, as

mentioned previously, I retreated from the outside world. I still remember the first time I went to the grocery store with her; she was eleven days old, and rather than walking into the familiar Kroger building, I felt like I'd landed on an alien planet. I believe that the hormones involved in pregnancy and childbirth are very, very powerful and do not adapt to suit the fickle needs of modern life. It took quite some time for me to feel comfortable taking Stella beyond the nest we'd created at home, and I believe that the obscured backgrounds of these paintings represent the retreat I experienced after Stella was born. It took several months of painting before I included a specific background in a piece. *Effortless* (Figure 6) is a painting of Stella at the beach for the first time when we traveled to Charleston, South Carolina in the middle of August 2008.



(Figure 6) *Effortless*

It was difficult for me to choose to paint that image; it lent itself to the oversimplified and trite qualities people often ascribe to babies and toddlers, but it was just as much a part of my experience as the exhaustion, the crying, and less stereotypical circumstances of parenthood. This particular painting was the first one I painted for the exhibit with the background included. Literally, the painting depicted one of many firsts for Stella. She ran around in the sand, picking it up in fistfuls, tottering towards the water, laughing and

splashing. She embodied pure joy, and it was contagious. Symbolically, including the background in this painting represented the process of becoming comfortable in the world again myself, but also comfortable letting my daughter explore it on her own without unnecessary interference on my part. I was able to trust her and her environment in a way that I hadn't when she was a newborn.

It was important to me to allow the metaphorical meanings in the work to become apparent after the work was made. Trying to create a piece with a very specific idea for content or meaning is very difficult. It usually ends up looking forced, as though I were approaching things backwards. My intention is certainly important in the creation of a painting, but intuition guides my choices in the composition, supported by previous education of formal issues. Allowing the process to happen this way facilitates a kind of trust and surrender both to myself and the larger process. When I'm able to align with this process in making art, it clarifies a lot of what I'm thinking and feeling. It's a way of reconnecting, of extending myself outward to invite others to share themselves as well.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Furthermore, we have not even to risk the journey alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world. -Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand*

Faces

My intention in writing this thesis and in creating and exhibiting these paintings is to continue the process of becoming a more whole human being, to stop behaving in ways that compensate for and cover up my insecurities, and instead identify them, show them to the world, and invite them to be something more constructive. I seek wholeness primarily for myself but also for those who surround and support me. This specific process is undeniably a lifelong one, but the awareness and articulation of it really began with my undergraduate art exhibit, which I completed in November 1999. The exhibit consisted of paintings made from photos of friends, family members, and myself. I titled the exhibit, *metanoia*, after a term described in Joseph Chilton Pearce's earlier book, *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg*. This process is described in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a transformative change of heart; especially: a spiritual conversion." However, in Pearce's book, the process described is a natural part of human development, if the appropriate precursors are present. "*Metanoia* is the Greek word for conversion: a 'fundamental transformation of mind.' It is the process by which concepts are

reorganized. *Metanoia* is a specialized, intensified adult form of the same world-view development found shaping the mind of the infant" (Pearce 7). When worldviews develop, it's not possible for the process to be conscious. Once the infant establishes a sense of physical and emotional safety and security with the mother, she begins to explore the surrounding physical environment. Her cognitive development is consumed with making sense of the world around her, but all the while, she is absorbing the emotional responses, opinions, assertions, and directions of the adults surrounding her. She begins to build her worldview immediately, but she is not able to think abstractly until she reaches the age of seven or so. It takes quite a bit longer than that for her to be able to consider how and why she believes what she does. Therefore, there has to be a worldview that is firmly in place and functional before it can be questioned and deconstructed. Or, as I've said to a friend, "There has to be something to let go of before one can decide to let go of it."

Another important part of *metanoia* is discussed in *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg*. Pearce states that the nature of the questions one asks determines the quality and nature of the answers. "A question determines and brings about its answer just as the desired end shapes the nature of the kind of question asked" (7). So, the seed of the answer is contained within the question itself.

For me, this concept represented a process of becoming aware of my own motivations, of understanding how and why I think, feel, and act the way I do, via the deconstruction of familial and cultural values and beliefs. Once those were clearer, I could engage in a process of releasing values, beliefs, and behaviors that were no longer useful and reinforce those that were. As a twenty-year old getting ready to graduate from

college, the beginning of that process was very important and from what I've come to understand developmentally appropriate. Now that I'm a thirty-year old mother, the process continues and my sense of urgency has only grown stronger.

While art is very important to me, I've never been the kind of person to carry a sketchbook with me wherever I go. Being an artist is one of many roles I embody as a whole, complex human being. I also enjoy reading, actively observing and listening, cultivating my own intuition, putting a lot of energy into relationships, taking risks, trusting, and ultimately finding balance in life wherever I can. Furthermore, my perception of who I am is complex and always changing; I try to find some equilibrium within myself through a process of conscious growth, while letting go of perceptions that keep me from discovering my own potential. Now, making art is an outgrowth of the process of living; it's also a metaphorical mirror in which I perceive my life.

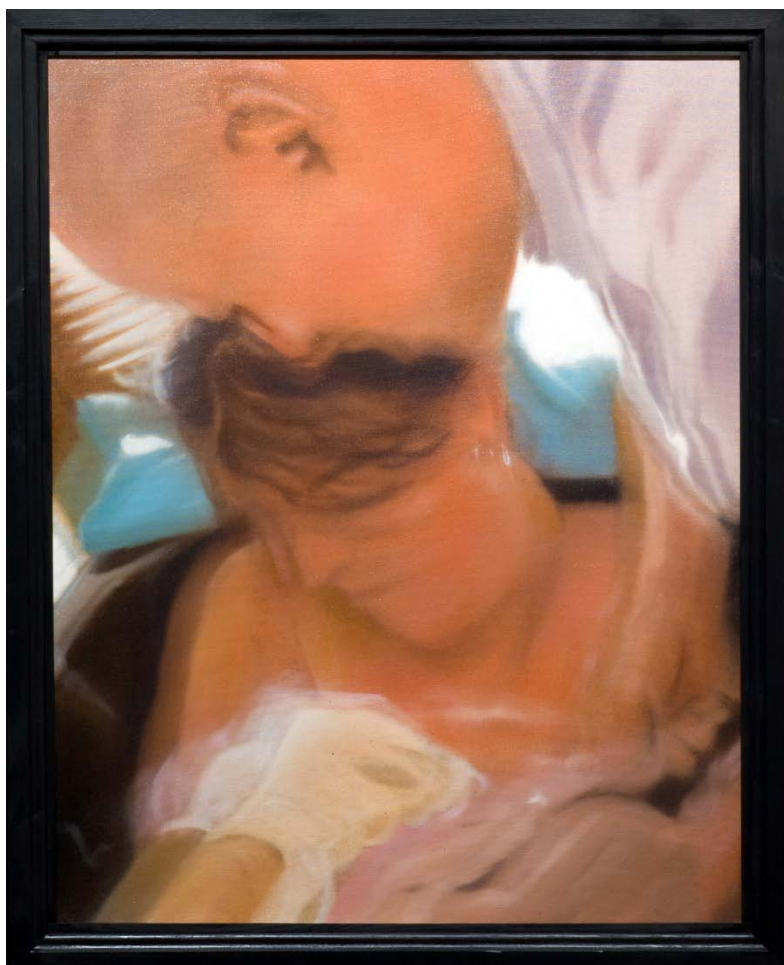
Representative of the theory that the universe has a holographic structure, the content of my work reflects how my experience is both unique to me and also somehow like the experiences of six and a half billion others. Reflecting upon the finished pieces, I learn more about not only myself but the collective human experience as well. When I look at others' artwork and I see an image of a woman who's crying, I can relate to that. The other visual information may be very interesting, but I know what it's like to be a woman and cry, and, therefore, I connect with that collective human, female experience. While the range of possible human experiences is infinite, the range of possible human emotions is not. Jenny Saville's monumental oil paintings that include larger-than-life self-portraits, communicate something that connects to this concept for me. While her self-portraits are less-than-idealized images of her body from uncomfortable and

disconcerting points of view, there is an unapologetic real quality to the flesh that invites the viewer in, to admit imperfection and accept it as an inevitable part of being human. This is also a very important reason why I continue to make art. I seek to create a dialogue between myself, the work, and the viewer that allows us to connect to each other, even if we're never face to face. When the imagery in one of my paintings resonates with someone (whether it triggers a specific memory or a general kind of emotion), we're both immediately connected to something larger than ourselves. The human dialogue, the universality of human experience, is what binds us all together. It's what underlies the principle of *Tat tvam asi*, Thou art that.

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CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION



Suspension, 24" x 30", 2008



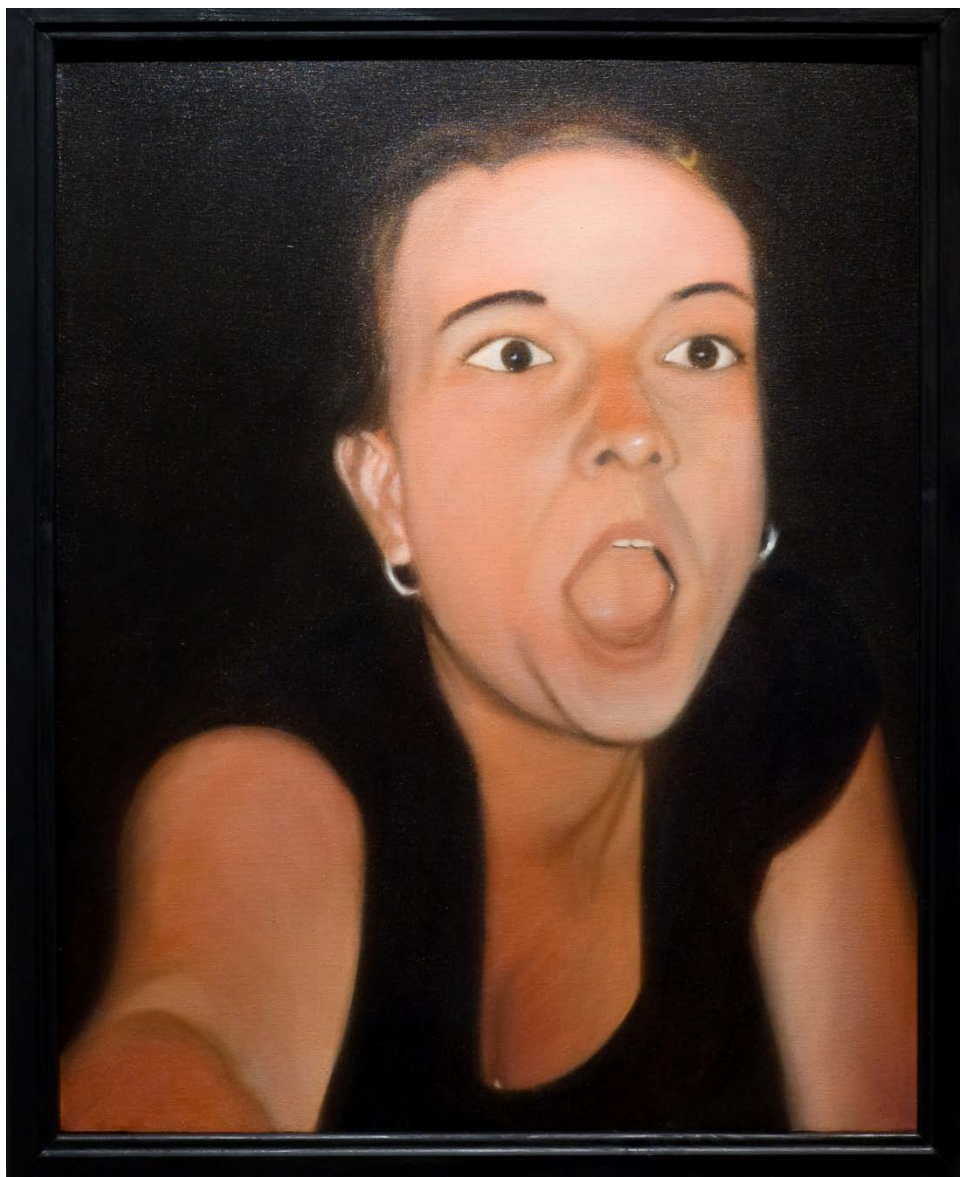
Self-Soother, 24" x 30", 2008



Concrete Operations, 24" x 30", 2008



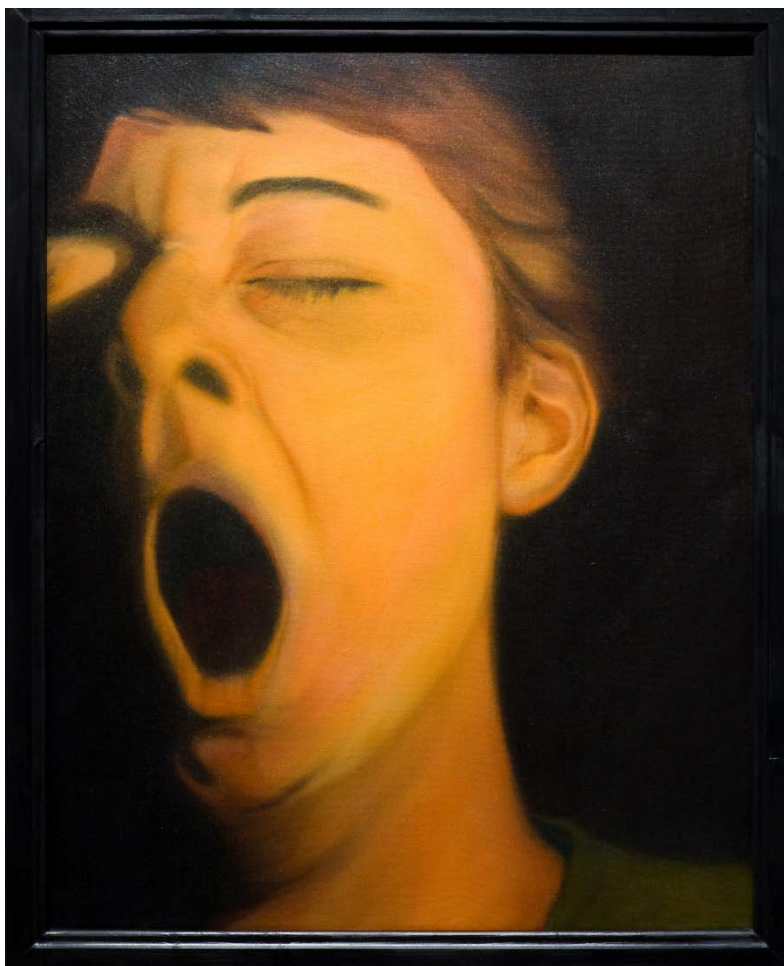
Assertion, 24" x 30", 2008



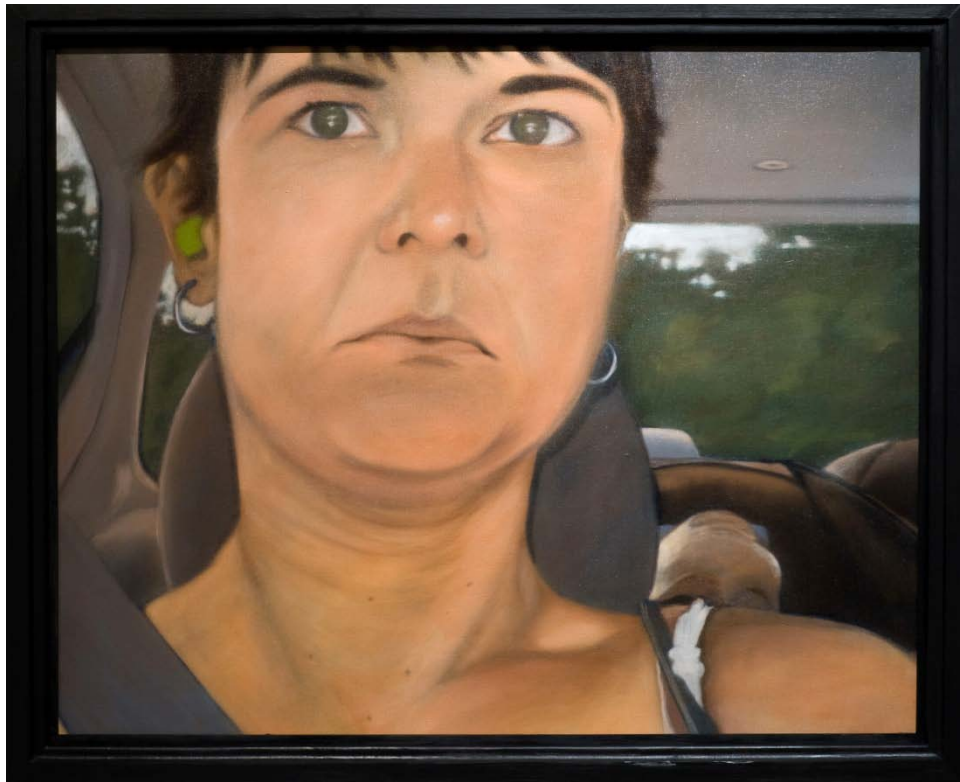
Almost, Not Yet, 24" x 30", 2008



Bonded Bridge, 24" x 30", 2008



Fading, 24" x 30", 2008



Separation Anxiety, 24" x 30", 2008



Establishing the Bond, 24" x 30", 2008



Effortless, 24" x 30", 2008

APPENDIX: ARTIST STATEMENT

A phrase from the ancient Hindu texts, the Upanishads, “Thou art that” (originally “Tat tvam asi” in Sanskrit) represents the idea that the divine is present in everything including ourselves, other people, and in life itself. Rather than having a relationship with a separate entity, the divine is a uniting force of which we are all a part. Therefore, I am you, you are me, and we are all one. Thou art that. Using the word, “Thou” instead of “you” infuses the phrase with reverence rather than objectivity and distance.

These self-portraits are explorations of the shift in identity that I have experienced during the past two years. Being pregnant, giving birth, then re-exploring the world with and through my daughter has facilitated an understanding of “Thou art that” on a much deeper, experiential level. My intention is to expand that understanding back out into the rest of my life and relationships, to actually live what I believe.

This does not necessarily mean letting go of human emotion or insecurity, but accepting that life is perfect, right here, right now. That being the case, the images themselves are snapshots of everyday life and represent the accompanying emotions we often feel.

PAULA J. SARUT

46